

**FILED**

MAR - 2 2026

**ACJC**

**SUPREME COURT OF NEW JERSEY  
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON  
JUDICIAL CONDUCT**

**DOCKET NO: ACJC 2025-491**

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**IN THE MATTER OF**

**STEVEN BRISTER  
JUDGE OF THE MUNICIPAL COURT**

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**FORMAL COMPLAINT**

Daniel Burns, Disciplinary Counsel, Advisory Committee on Judicial Conduct (“Complainant”), complaining of Steven Brister, J.M.C. (“Respondent”), says:

**Facts**

1. Respondent is a member of the Bar of the State of New Jersey, having been admitted to the practice of law in 1985.
2. At all times relevant to this matter, Respondent served as a part-time judge in the City of East Orange Municipal Court, a position he continues to hold.
3. Respondent also serves as an acting judge in the municipal courts for the cities of Newark and Orange.

## Count I

4. Complainant repeats the allegations contained in the foregoing paragraphs as if each were set forth fully and at length herein.

5. On June 9 and 10, 2025, Respondent attended the annual Municipal Division Conference (the “Conference” or “training conference”) in furtherance of the Administrative Office of the Courts (“AOC”) Judicial Education Program.

6. The Conference was held at a national hotel chain in Bergen County and was attended by more than 400 people including municipal judges, municipal division managers and assistant managers from each vicinage, and AOC Municipal Court Services Division staff.

7. The Conference provides judges and court support staff with the opportunity to further develop their expertise in specific areas of the law and law-related disciplines, and to contribute to the knowledge of their peers through participatory workshops.

8. On June 9, 2025, Respondent appeared at the Conference wearing a black baseball cap bearing the flag of Palestine embroidered on the front and the word “Palestine” embroidered alongside the flag, as well as a black and white checkered keffiyeh draped around his neck and shoulders.

9. Wearing a hat with the flag of Palestine, and the word “Palestine,” to this Conference, particularly when combined with the black and white checkered

keffiyeh, may reasonably have been interpreted by those in attendance and the broader public, as a political statement in support of Palestine in the ongoing conflict in the region at the time.

10. Following the plenary session that morning, the acting municipal presiding judge for the Essex Vicinage, to whom Respondent reports, advised Respondent that complaints were received about Respondent's attire, indicating that some attendees were offended.

11. Respondent's municipal presiding judge further informed Respondent that a request had been made for him to remove his baseball cap.

12. Respondent informed his presiding judge that he would not remove his baseball cap unless there was an announcement made requiring all attendees to remove their headgear.

13. Respondent continued to wear the baseball cap for the remainder of the Conference on June 9, 2025.

14. At no time on June 9, 2025 did Respondent advise his presiding judge or any members of management that his refusal to remove his baseball cap was due to his religious beliefs.

15. A municipal court presiding judge from another vicinage, whom Respondent has known for more than 30 years, both socially and professionally, advised

Respondent that his presiding judge wanted him to remove his hat, which Respondent, again, refused to do.

16. In a telephone conversation and text message between Respondent and his presiding judge thereafter on June 9, 2025, Respondent stated that he chose the hat because it was raining that day and, wanting a brimmed hat, he chose the *Palestine* baseball cap as it was “[t]he first one in [his] caps shelf.” Respondent explained to his presiding judge during this telephone call that he wore that keffiyeh because he might have gotten cold during the conference.

17. On October 24, 2025, Respondent, when interviewed under oath by staff to the Advisory Committee on Judicial Conduct (“ACJC”), testified that he wore the subject baseball cap to the Conference on June 9, 2025, because it “matched [his] outfit” and he did not view either the cap or the keffiyeh as a political statement.

18. In respect of Respondent’s decision to wear a keffiyeh to the training conference, Respondent stated that he has “many different keffiyehs, not just the black and white one. But this [keffiyeh] is the one that [matched] [his] outfit [that] day.” Respondent further stated, “But for me personally, I wear it for the spiritual and religious reasons.”

19. In addition, when interviewed by ACJC staff, Respondent testified as follows:

Because of the rain, I said I'm going to wear a scarf because I know how hot – cool it could get in the hotel. And I grabbed the first hat which was matching my outfit. So, the scarf was for religious reasons, as well as to put on my head to protect me from the rain.

20. Respondent also stated during the interview, “[w]hen I got out of my car, I put my scarf over my head because of the rain and kept it moving. When I got inside the building, I put the [scarf] on my shoulder.”

21. By wearing a hat containing the Palestinian flag and the word “Palestine,” in combination with the keffiyeh, to a Judiciary-sponsored training event for municipal judges and others, Respondent engaged in political speech in violation of Canon 7, Rule 7(A), of the Code of Judicial Conduct.

22. Respondent's insubordination in refusing to remove his hat at the request of his presiding judge demonstrated his failure to conform his conduct to the high standards expected of judges and impugned the integrity of the Judiciary in violation of Canon 1, Rule 1.1, and Canon 2, Rule 2.1, of the Code of Judicial Conduct.

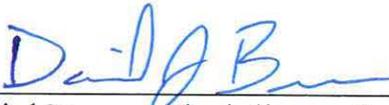
WHEREFORE, Complainant charges that Respondent has violated the following Canons of the Code of Judicial Conduct:

Canon 1, Rule 1.1, which requires judges to observe high standards of conduct so that the integrity and independence of the Judiciary may be preserved;

Canon 2, Rule 2.1, which requires judges to avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety and to act, at all times, in a manner that promotes public confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the Judiciary; and

Canon 7, Rule 7(A), which prohibits judges from engaging in any political activity.

DATED: March 2, 2026

  
Daniel Burns, Disciplinary Counsel  
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON JUDICIAL CONDUCT  
Richard J. Hughes Justice Complex  
25 Market Street  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor, North Wing  
P.O. Box 037  
Trenton, New Jersey 08625  
(609) 815-2900 Ext. 51910